



Conference Paper

Representations of Contemporary Cultural Challenges in Russian Cinema (Based on the Short Film Genre)

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Abstract

The article presents the analysis of the short films included in the competition program of the 28th 'Kinotavr' Open Festival of Russian Cinema in 2017. Young Russian cinema is almost entirely concerned with the present, which is everywhere: in the filmmakers' age; in the cinematic themes, which, as a rule, avoids the past; in a new accelerating tempo; and in the grappling with the challenges of modern culture. In the films we explore here, modernity is complicated, uncertain, unpredictable, and full of new risks. The directors offer different strategies for dealing with the challenges: absurdization, mythologization, open-ended aesthetics.

Keywords: short film, modernity, uncertainty, unpredictability, human-made risks

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Received: 22 November 2018

Accepted: 29 November 2018

Published: 23 December 2018

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Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Facets of Culture in the Age of Social Transition Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

In feature cinema, short films are usually made by the young beginning directors. A short format provides them with a certain degree of freedom, both in themes and in language, since their works are not subject to the rigorous future box office demands, and depends much less on the dictates of the producer.

The shorts competition program of the 2017 'Kinotavr' Open Festival of Russian Cinema represented the challenges of modernity.

Contemporary culture is defined by a number of qualities. Specifically, these qualities are based on the understanding of culture as a dynamic system that constructs the meanings, and creates the tools for preservation, objectification and transmission of these meanings. Modernity has been described in contemporary philosophy of culture through a number of metaphors: 'liquid modernity' (Bauman), 'runaway world' (Giddens), 'an era of unpredictability' (Taleb). Highlighting ambiguity of the concept of 'modernity', Lyotard proposed to get rid of its chronological definition; he introduced instead the concept of 'postmodernity'. Lyotard described complexification as the most important characteristic of postmodernity. "For me, the question of what causes this

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complexification – and this is a difficult question – is very important. It may look like a certain fateful destiny beyond our volition carries us towards the increasingly complex states. Our wants – safety, identity, happiness – that seemingly follow from our proximate state as living or social beings, appear to be completely at odds with this type of compulsion forcing us today into the complexification, mediation, numeration and synthesis of objects of any kind, as well as into the changing scale of objects” [3, p. 54]. Culturally, complexification becomes a challenge met today by the mass culture, which is focused on ‘simplicity’. However, according to Lyotard, “today the demand for simplicity would generally seem a harbinger of barbarity” [Ibid].

2. Art as Unpredictability

These traits of modernity outlined earlier – uncertainty, liquidity, runaway character, unpredictability – highlight the complexity as the most important modern cultural characteristics. Yuri Lotman, who believed that an ‘explosion’ (explosion of meaning, intellectual explosion, explosion of values) is required for cultural development, wrote in his last book about the fruitfulness of uncertainty and unpredictability: “... The process which Prigogine has traced on a level of physical, chemical and biological patterns, acquires different characteristics when consciousness appears on scene. Becoming an act, an unpredictable event has to be thought about differently...” [4, pp. 48-49].

Art as a cultural subsystem that fulfills many of sociocultural functions also carries within itself a meaning-making ability. Moreover, in this respect art has more freedom than other cultural subsystems related to law, control of relationships or knowledge. “The function of art within the general system of various cultural spheres is exactly that it produces a reality which is much freer than the reality of the material world” [4, p. 140]. Art functions as a “workshop of unpredictability” [4, p. 134].

‘Black swan’ is a metaphor used by Nassim Taleb to describe an unpredictable event: “[it] is an event with the following three attributes. First, it is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact... Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable.” [5, pp. xvii-xviii].

Naturally, nothing could predict a cow suddenly appearing in a metropolis’s apartment block. *Milk*, Darya Vlasova’s absurd drama with comic elements, is a film about a family who suddenly encounter a cow in their 14-story apartment. The cow becomes a mediator in family communication, inducing every family member to talk about their

secret desires: the children want a dog, mother wants to sing, and grandfather wants to finally capture a spy. Darya Vlasova masterfully employs the clichéd advertising imagery: a father reading a newspaper, the boy's glasses as a symbol of intelligence, a mother wearing pumps, instead of slippers, as a token of a modern housewife. Surprise at the cow's appearance is swiftly replaced with a functional attitude: the animal is turned to use in a large minimalistic kitchen, a center of family life. Its horns are used to dry laundry, it can support a broom, but its main advantage is the lack of excrements. The emerging love-habit of children and even adult is destroyed by a shot fired by the grandfather – a former KGB officer wishing to put things to order. In the finale, when an entire family works to utilize the cow's bulk, we hear the boy's voice talking about love and his first encounter with death. This voice brings to mind the voice from Andrei Platonov's 'Cow'. But Platonov tells a story about an irreparable loss, a loss that is sudden, visceral and raw. A boy from Darya Vlasova's movie not so much suffers – rather, he takes the cow's death in stride, without a surprise. As a result, stoicism turns into a prudent indifference, and love – into a memory about the consumed meat.

3. 'Manufactured risk' as a Storyline Energy

Describing the 'runaway' world of modernity, Anthony Giddens pointed to the emergence of new risks: "In all traditional cultures, one could say, and in industrial society right up to the threshold of the present day, human beings worried about the risks coming from external nature – from bad harvests, floods, plagues or famines. At a certain point, however – very recently in historical terms – we started worrying less about what nature can do to us, and more about what we have done to nature. This marks the transition from the predominance of external risk to that of manufactured risk." [2, p. 26]

Manufactured risks created within the system of social communications often become subject to artistic explorations (interpersonal conflicts, ecological disasters). Art has developed an effective strategy of 'working' with risks through their ridiculing and absurdization. Ruslan Bratov's comedy *Lalay-Balalay* uses a tone of 'unceremonious familiarity' to create a new mode of looking both at the interpersonal relationships and at the leaders' responsibility. This mode of looking, chosen by the directors Bratov and Grigory Dobrygin (the film's scriptwriter and producer), at first unfolds as a familiar story about the adventures of several drunken men, bringing to mind Nietzsche's aphorism: "In every real man a child is hidden that wants to play." This natural desire is fulfilled at the merry-go-round which proves not so easy to stop – an act that requires

almost sacrificial heroics of the manager Oleg Maratovich (played by Evgeny Sytyi). By the time we reach the movie's climax, precisely sketched escapades of drunken men develop a highly metaphorical meaning: they represent an incredible amount of efforts spent on useless activity; incompatibility between the goals and methods used to achieve them; and, most importantly, perpetual futile efforts spent in a desire to stop the ride. Any hope we may have had that this absurd circle would be stopped, is quenched in the film's finale, when a small boy says his mother (played by Yana Troyanova): "I want to do this too," and the mother answers with a metallic note in her voice: "You will, when you grow up!" This confidently optimistic answer is absurd, comic and scary at the same time: "Show must go on!"

4. The Mythologization of Risks

Leonid Rybakov's *Bogi nefiti* ('Oil Gods') represents a national myth of miraculous salvation. Here such miracle takes the shape of oil, affectionately lauded by the character of Timofey Tribuntsev. *Bogi nefiti* is a version of social mythology, a Russian mythology of hydrocarbons. This mythological world-picture centers neither on the human being, nor the spirit, nor the economy, but around the Pipe. The film starts with a close up shot of the oil pipe valve. The main character (Timofey Tribuntsev) is a shrewd village bloke, who deliberately is not given a name. He holds the knowledge about oil. For a third of the film, he, alone on screen, talks with the invisible interlocutors telling them the secret of wealth, calling the pipe Mother and Benefactress. Tribuntsev's character offers a simple syllogism: "Oil is a God's gift; you take it and give it, and become a God yourself." The secret is to find a pipe and, as things usually go, steal some oil. Curiously, actual ancient mythology only allowed stealing on an alien territory. In Rybakov's movie, such alien territory is Russia itself, neglected and immense.

5. Complexity Against Simplification

Writing about the challenges of contemporary culture, A. Asmolov highlights such features of modernity as 'uncertainty, complexity and multiplicity' [1]. Alexei Shabarov's debut film *How I Changed My Skin* posits the problems of individual development, freedom of choice, attitude to authority and the non-conforming strategies of behavior. The story begins with the mother bringing her son Dmitri Lekontsev – a 14-year old boy tall for his age – to a trial swimming class. From the opening shots we recognize the cadences both of a mother handing in the documents, and of administrator who

prepares paperwork. The mother's speech is obsequious and ingratiating, the receptionist girl talks in lazy condescending manner. The setting is also familiar: metal locker doors, cold unkempt shower stalls, military-style commands imperatively issued by the coach.

In the very first scene, after filling in the form, the mother gives her son a typical strategic advice, 'Just let it go'. The same attitude, colored with gender-based stereotypes, is voiced after the first training session: "He is shouting, because he is a man; he is man, you are a man... you just let it go, just focus on what you have to do..." The film's main character needs only three coaching sessions to rebel against the coach, who represents a classical type of a sadistic tyrant enjoying his power over the boys and using prison-camp methods of pitting members of the group against each other. At the first session, our hero got nicknamed *Babushka* ('Granny'), at the second one he witnessed the twisted methods of totalitarian education, when the coach threatened the youngest and weakest member of the group (nicknamed *Shapka*, 'Hood') that, if he hits himself one more time, an entire group would have to swim 20 swimming pool lengths with their hands behind their backs ('hands behind your back' is a familiar prison expression). In another shot, the whole group is swimming with their hands behind their backs. After this, we witness the group punishment meted on the youngest boy – or, rather, the outcomes of this punishment. Daniil, who enters the last into the shower room, cannot open his locker. He calls a security guard. After the locker is forced open, we see a battered boy sitting inside. The third session is a last one: our hero leaves the swimming pool after accidentally pushing the coach into the water and calmly goes to the changing room. A 'real man' (coach) runs after the teenager with a wet towel in his hand and starts beating him, saying "Your parents didn't beat you enough as a kid." The boy's answering blow sends the coach to the floor. Another image shows the coach lying in a pool of blood, while the teenager (Daniil) calmly changes his clothes. But the highlight of the film is its finale, where the small boy (*Shapka*), who has been an object of bullying and humiliation for the entire class and its coach, jumps on his body and starts stamping it, repeating the coach's favorite phrases in time with his steps: "Get up! By twos, count off! Into the water, toads, into the water! What, have you come here to sleep? Where does it hurt? Whatever hurts, leave it at home!" The hideousness of the events creates an ambiguous ending. On the one hand, here we have a direct replication of violence; on the other – the violence itself serves as a resuscitation tool. A child (victim), joyfully jumping on the almost-dead body, reanimates his tormentor. Things have come full circle. It is impossible

to remain in this claustrophobic space, and the main character's escape is the only solution. Sometimes disobeying mom is the right thing to do.

Alexei Shabarov's film raises a problem which is highly important for the contemporary Russian audience – a problem of the ability to resist authoritarian power. At the same time, the movie balances between the concrete material shape of a closed swimming pool space – and an abstract scheme of relations between the coach and his class, the torturer and his victims. The movie genre is uncertain: it is not a parable, not a social drama, and not a young adult movie. This ambiguity is a perfect tool to describe the state of complexity and the multiplicity of possible conflict solutions – a state so characteristic of modern era.

6. Conclusions

Open ending – a characteristic feature of 1960s–1970s cinema – returns into the modern short films. Such endings fully depend on the ability of young authors to address the cultural challenges, in which unpredictability and complexity battle with unambiguity and simplicity.

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